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## THE FIGHTER

By ALBERT PAYSON TERHUNE

Author of "Caleb Conover, Railroadman," "Dr. Dale," "On Glory's Trail," etc.

NEW YORK

FRANK F. LOVELL COMPANY

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(Continued.)

She ended with a nervous laugh, and looked up at Caleb with a pretty, helpless air of seeking protection. Amal always found this appealing attitude irresistible. In social longings were Conover's "feet of clay." Letty Standish served as a similar pedestal for Caleb. He wished young Hawarden not to throw himself upon the test-a-tate of their homeward walk. He wanted, lovelike, to reassure Letty with unpeppable doughty promises of safeguard from peril; to see her soft round eyes raised to his in the admiration such protestations are wont to excite between very young or very old lovers. But Jack was dogmatically treading along beside them in all the charming ignorance of his age and temperament. The boy's sulks were wont to dissolve and he joined again in the talk; still harping on his hero.

"I never met Conover till this morning," he said. "I wish you knew him better. It's queer I never met him at Miss Shevlin's. She's his ward, you know."

Letty, to whom he spoke, answered with a tinge of the latent sub-acid in her gentle voice:

"I didn't know. But I've noticed things about Miss Shevlin that don't seem quite likely."

"Miss Shevlin," said the boy, hotly, "is the prettiest, brightest, best-bred girl I ever knew. If you mean she is—"

"I dare say," answered Letty with elaborate carelessness. "But I never noticed her especially."

"I don't see," persisted Jack, "how you could have helped it. She's the sort of girl everyone notices. There's something about her—"

"Why, what a zealous champion she has!" exclaimed Letty, playfully, her laughter ringing thin. "I congratulate her."

"You needn't," retorted Jack. "And I'm afraid you'll never even have a chance to congratulate me."

"By the way, Hawarden," interposed Caleb, lazily pouring oil on the churned waters, according to his wont. "I read your Scribner's story to-day. You can congratulate you on that, at any rate. Can't it? It was decidedly good."

I wondered at your knowledge of human nature," Hawarden's chest swelled. At twenty-two, who does not know human nature as never can be known in later years? And he was not a novice at recognition of that vast knowledge.

"I had some experience with life in my time," said Jack, dourly. "And I paint my fellow-man as I see him. Not as he ought to be. But as he is. If I seem merciless in my character drawing—"

"You do indeed!" began Caleb. But a fit of very well executed coughing cut short his remarks, and he was disappointed, sought to lead the talk back to the former happy theme.

"I'm writing a story now," he said. "That is bluffer in every way than anything I've done before. But I can't decide yet, even in my own mind whether it is very good or very bad. It is one or the other. I know that."

"If it's enough of either," replied Caleb, "it is certain to make a popular hit."

"I've made De-Miss Shevlin my heroine," pursued Hawarden, scornfully disregarding Caleb's untimely flattery. "But it's hard to put a girl like her on paper the way one sees her in one's mind. I wrote a poem about her once. Harper's Magazine accepted it."

He paused. Then, ridden by the demon of truth, added with reluctance, "They published it in fine print over toward the end. But, more buoyantly, 'I saw it copied afterward in no less than two papers.'"

"Why don't you put Mr. Conover into a story, too?" suggested Letty, unwilling not to seem quite at home in so profound a literary discussion. "Wouldn't he make a good character?"

"I'm afraid not," decided the boy, judiciously weighing his verdict. "He's more of a man than anyone else in all my experience. But he wouldn't fit into a story. I'm afraid. You see, he lacks romance, for one thing. One could hardly fancy Caleb Conover in love. And then—unless you count this evening's affair—I doubt if he was ever in an adventure of any sort in his life. His character, from a literary viewpoint, doesn't lend itself to action or analysis. In making the study of human nature my hobby, I have—almost sharply—"

"You are quite right," demurred Letty. "Not impossible. Improbable, at worst. I am afraid a great many people in Granite will find that out before he is through."

"They had reached the Standish home. Hawarden bade them good-night at the door; declining Letty's perfunctory invitation to come in. The evening was still young. But the lack of cordiality in Letty's voice grated on his armor of youth. He reflected somewhat belatedly that she and Caleb were engaged and that it was possible they might find themes even more alluring than literature to talk over, together."

So, unwilling, he left them. Caleb and Letty strolled slowly up the walk. The night was cool, for June. So, ignoring the lounging chairs on the veranda, they passed into the porch. "This is one of the last evenings we can sit indoors," commented Letty. "It's hard to realize that summer is so near. I suppose the weather will be good all the season. Everywhere else except in old-fashioned Granite, it must have ended weeks ago."

"Yes. We're old-fashioned here in Granite," said Caleb, seating himself on the arm of the chair into which she had thrown herself. "I think somebody once left an 1860 calendar in this town, and we've all been living by it ever since. We're like the scaly finny oldsters in the pond, who dream away their lives in the coral grove, while a seven stanza storm roared across the ocean overhead. When the storm of progress cuts a little hole in the surface we Granite folks blink upward from our dreams in pained disapproval. I think that's why we look askance at Conover. He represents—"

"Oh, am I to have that dreadful creature's name forever dinned into my ears?" complained Letty. "Isn't it enough that Father makes us ask him here to dinner, Friday, without your talking forever about him in the little while people leave us one together. In another minute Aunt Lydia will be pottering in to play propriety. And then—"

"And then," flew from the Aunt, though augured shall be my motto," finished Caleb. "I wish her virtues didn't oppress me so. I wouldn't object to her so much, if someone whose vocabulary was as limited as his knowledge of heaven's personnel hadn't once described her looks as 'salutary.' She has been trying so hard to live up to the picture, ever since, that it's a bit wearing on poor sinners like me."

"It's wicked to be so scurrilous," returned Letty, primly. "And I don't like to have you speak so of my family. After all, she is my aunt."

"Don't think for a moment I'm blaming you for that, sweetheart," he protested with an earnestness that left Letty as usual in doubt whether or not

he had perpetrated some witticism she ought to have seen. Taking hasty mental review of their talk, she decided he had not, and went on:

"Perhaps it is," he acquiesced. "But what a pity Fra Angelico and Raphael couldn't see her! Then there would have had all those cherubs and red-and-gold angels of theirs depicted with thin gray hair parted in the middle, and wild switch and half-inch eye-glasses."

"You have grown coarse from associating with that Conover man," pointed Letty. "It's his indecent to speak of switches. And it hurts my feelings cruelly to have you abuse the 'Nugget'!"

The tears, always comfortably near the surface, trembled in Letty's voice and eyes. Caleb, in a fever of regret, put his arm about her neck and drew away with a little hunch of the shoulders.

"You've spoiled my evening!" she wailed. "First you introduced that miserable man to me and made him frighten me, and now you make fun of me!"

Footsteps crossing the hall brought her tale of wrong to an abrupt halt. She sat up and furtively mopped her eyes. The door was ajar, and a faint light came from the room beyond. A relief to her that normally they left scant mark of their presence. Caleb, who had been in the room, looked at her with a glance until it seemed to embrace all the visible world.

Reuben Standish's widowed sister-in-law, who had been in the room, looked at her with a glance until it seemed to embrace all the visible world.

"Clive has been so bad again this evening!" she said with a sigh, after a greeting to Caleb. "I suppose these crosses are sent to us. But sometimes I am nearly tempted to wonder why. I actually caught him tacking his grandfather's slippers to the door, where I had left them. He said he was going to make him see his fault, what do you think I found him doing?"

"The house?" asked Caleb, looking at her with a glance until it seemed to embrace all the visible world.

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gized to his present hostess and dismissed the theme.

When dinner was at seven, why shouldn't people come on time? Was there a joke in it somewhere? A joke on himself? Anything, just now seemed possible. What was the use of smoking this measly cigarette when there was no one to see? He dropped it into a bronze dish, went over to the cheval glass and surveyed himself from head to foot. Then he turned; and, looking over one shoulder, sought to see how his dress coat fitted in the back. The twisting of his body caused a huge central wrinkle to spring out between his shoulders, wrinkles diverging from it. Also there was a spear of stiff red hair in the very center of his well-brushed head that had escaped from the combined lures of pomade and water. Conover crossed to the chiffonier, picked up one of a pair of military brushes and attached the rebellious lock with vigor.

There was no water in sight. How did those people expect a man to brush his hair without water? No pomade either. Not even brilliantine. Could it be that folk of the Standish class did not use such acids? Or did they keep their locks up? Caleb's eyes swept the room and its quiet furnishings appraisingly. It did not represent at all his idea of luxury. Not a bow not a tidy, not a fancy screen nor a lambrequin in sight. Yet there was an indefinable something about the place that met his approval. He felt to walking back and forth, uneasily; pausing every now and then in front of the cheval glass.

Amal Conover, who had come early in the fiddle hopes of a word alone with Letty before the dinner, found him thus employed. Conover swung around on his friend with a grant of relief.

"Hello!" he said, his heavy voice actually cordial. "I began to think it was Judgment Day and that I was the first one resurrected. How'd I look? All right? Nothin' wrong in this get-up is there?"

"The glass of fashion and the mould of form!" laughed Caleb. "Behold a phenomenon! The worker of miracles—and Steeloids—desires to ask a mere mortal's opinion! In the glass at the flashing studs and the ready-made lawn tie. Then, brushing away the snarl of worry, he answered, carelessly: 'I don't like to dress like everybody else. Too much sameness for me. It's well enough for fellows without an idea of scrap of originality in their heads. I like to do a little different.'"

"A Beau Brummell come to Judgment!" mocked Caleb. "But with diamonds instead of price ten per cent. a year. I hope you won't set the fashion just yet. You'll break us. It's all very well to dress regardless of expense—"

"Let it go at that," ordered Conover suddenly. "There's something else I wanted to ask you about, first time I see you alone. You told me once that Desiree Shevlin could take any place she wanted in society here, if only she married the right sort of a man. Remember?"

"Why, yes, but—"

"Well, would it work both ways? I mean, if I was to marry a girl who had a big social position in Granite, would it help me on, any?"

"It should think so," hesitated Caleb, coming to a desire to laugh at the unique idea. "Why? Are you thinking of it?"

"Not exactly thinkin' of it, but turnin' it over in my mind. I'd like to thinkin' about it I'd do it. That's my way."

"Who is the lucky damsel?" bantered Caleb. "Or have you selected her yet?"

"I've about picked her out," said Caleb slowly. "Just now she's keepin' company with another man."

"Of course you won't let that stand in your way for an instant?"

"No," returned Caleb, on whom irony of any sort was ever lost. "Of course not. I have a way of gettin' what I want. I only wish," he continued with a half sigh of weariness, "that I could always keep on waitin' what I get."

Clive Standish ran into the room. From one of the servants he had heard of Caleb's arrival.

"What fun to find you before you go down!" he cried. "I was afraid you wouldn't see me to-night and I knew you'd be disappointed. Aunt Lydia won't let me sit up for the musicale because I was bad last evening. And she's made me learn a hymn called 'I Know That God is Wrath With Me!'"

The hymn is signed 'I. Watts.' I think I. Watts must have been a very sorrowful person. I wonder if God really disliked him as much as I. Watts pretended. He—"

The child checked himself, catching sight of Letty. "I beg your pardon," he said. "I didn't see there was anyone here besides Mr. Caleb. Mr. Caleb," he explained, condescendingly, "is a friend of mine."

"Go on with your gabfest together, then," vouchsafed Caleb, with an effort at unbending. "Don't mind me. The boy's brows contracted at sound of the false note in Caleb's voice. He looked at the Fighter long and with frank criticism. Caleb bore the scrutiny with visible discomfort. He was not fond of children and did not understand them. Having had no childhood himself he could nowhere meet them on equal terms. Yet, as this under-

Elton-suited youngster was apparently a relative of Letty's and a member of the same household, he sought to improve the acquaintance.

"I knew a little rat about your age," he began, with elephantine gentleness his name's Billy Shevlin. Smart boy too. Sharp as a whip. Ever meet him?"

"No, sir," replied Clive. "I think not."

(To be Continued.)

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